

At close, in Genet and in Baldwin we find an impulse toward connection and revolt not based upon a morality or on a programmatic politic, but upon the ineffable lived reality that exceeds these discourses. For both of them, the work of art was an attempt at an uncontrollable communication that overflows the limits and points toward the outside of civilized language.

some
promiscuous
queers

We see this in that great betrayal of the human family: to create ourselves on our own terms, to connect and co-conspire, to forge a new ecstatic communication, to discover and grow worlds from which to attack—to flip *the Welcome Table*, to burn *the Great House*.

Between Strangers and Friends

Reading Baldwin and Genet

an excerpt from *baedan journal of queer time travel*



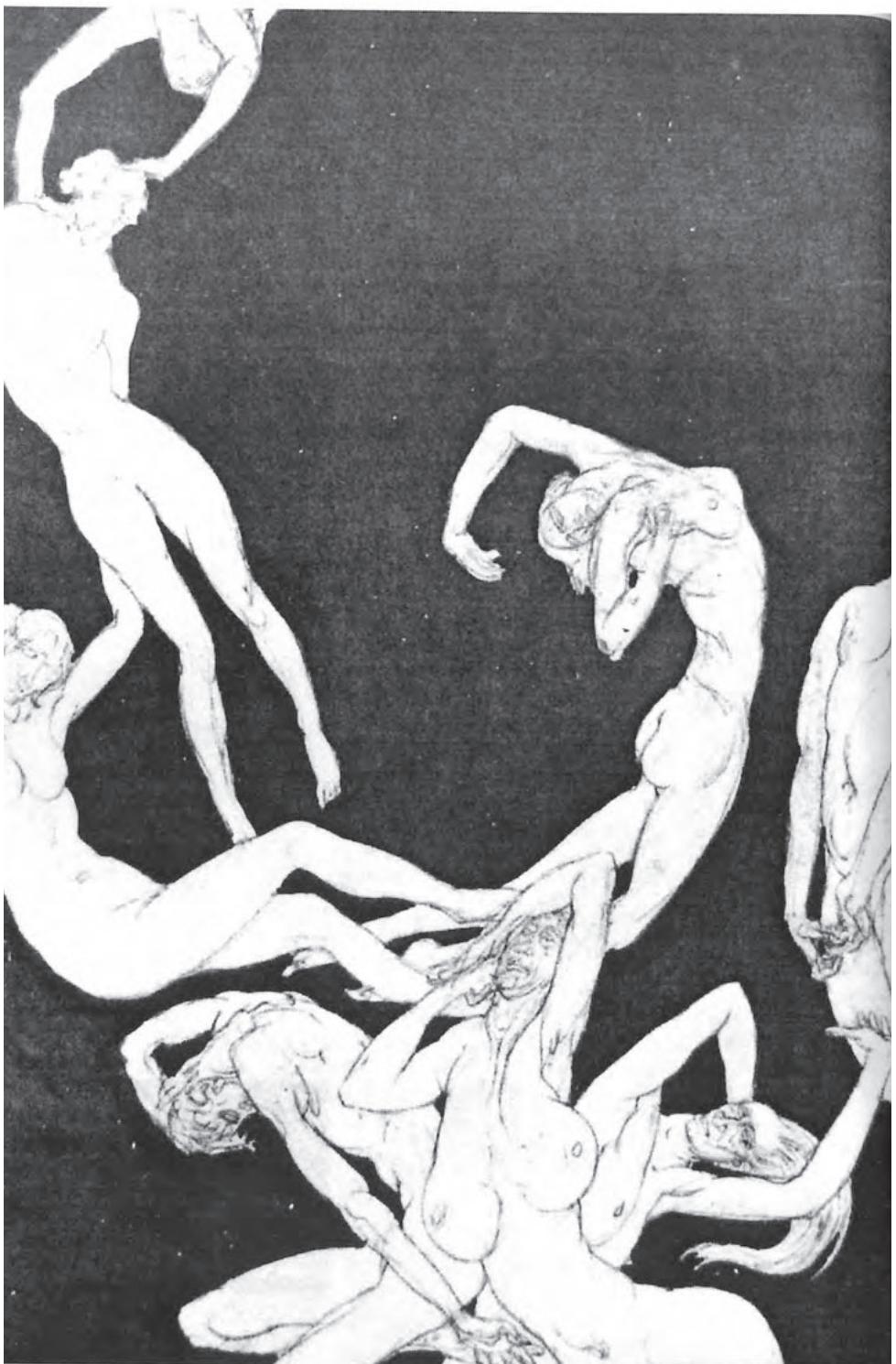
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Between Strangers and Friends

Reading Baldwin and Genet

IT HAPPENS FROM TIME TO TIME THAT A TEXT OR constellation of texts, by means of synchronicity or mere happenstance, demands one's attention. The present investigation opens a set of texts which performed this exact feat: demanded attention through its co-incidence with the conflicts unfolding in recent days. What follows examines the interweaving lives and thought of two autodidactic queer figures born a world apart: Jean Genet and James Baldwin. Both contributed, in word and deed, invaluable weapons to struggles against the sexual and racial orders of their time. Both are seen, by virtue of the searing beauty of their early writing, as early prophets of the gay liberation movement, and yet each remained lifelong outsiders to that world. Each committed the later parts of their lives to the movement (armed and otherwise) for the destruction of white supremacy in the United States. Neither found in queerness the preconditions for inclusion or the basis of community, but instead a means of connection with other rebellious and excluded figures. In a time when the dead end of a politics around gay identity is all too apparent and when a nascent wave of struggle has begun again to crash against the hardened edifice of white supremacy, it feels necessary to examine the traces and impressions left by these iconoclastic writers. Such a reading offers a tremendous amount to careful listeners. In them we find a cautionary tale of their situation, but also our own. Within this cold assessment remain brilliant and battle-worn, scathing and queer visions of a lived

revolt against the social order, against a world which creates and annihilates us as sexual and racial subjects.

We'll closely read their works written in the period between 1970 and 1971, as well as interviews with each writer.[†] Reading them now, after four decades of the defeat—through repression and recuperation—of the movements in which they participated, means approaching them as friends lost at sea. We find them swimming amidst the same questions confronting us today: questions of the family, “the people,” exile and revolt, the racial and sexual divisions that separate us and how those divisions might be broken. We recognize Genet and Baldwin as friends—in their friendship with one another and in ours with them—because of their status as outsiders; their familiar queerness at odds with their time.

Genet, in interviews, explicitly revealed a certain queerness as integral to his being. In a gesture of naked honesty, he described his narcissistic drive—one concerned with his own happiness, his own way of being, without relation to the prescribed roles or categories to which it corresponds for others. He offers no theory of his homosexuality or of desire:

I'm homosexual. Okay. There's not much to it. Trying to find out why or even how I became homosexual is a pointless diversion.



[†] The texts: Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 1972. Genet's “Introduction to *Soledad Brother*”, “For George Jackson”, “The Red and the Black”, “After the Assassination”, and “America is Afraid”, all compiled in *The Declared Enemy* ed. Albert Dichy and trans. Jeff Fort, 1991. The interviews: Genet interviewed by Hubert Fichte, appearing in *Gay Sunshine Interviews* 1 and also *The Declared Enemy*; Baldwin interviewed by Studs Terkel, Richard Goldstein, and Quincy Troupe, published as “An Interview with James Baldwin”, “Go the Way Your Blood Beats”, and *The Last Interview*, compiled in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview*, 2014.

Russell, Thaddeus. "The Color of Discipline". *American Quarterly*, 2008.

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His queerness and his life plays out within a singular and interior space. Genet's homosexuality demonstrates a matter of separation, of becoming-singular, an abjection. For him, homosexuality and crime (inseparable) establish a non-relation to the world around him. He could only acknowledge the perception of himself as a leading voice in contemporary gay life with a great deal of distance, if not dismissal. Such a publicity—as in *Saint Genet*, for example—elicited only "a kind of disgust."

He said, regarding Sartre's reading: "I saw myself naked and stripped by someone other than myself. In all my books I strip myself, but at the same time I disguise myself with words, choices, attitudes, magic. Sartre stripped me without mercy. He wrote about me in the present tense." Rather than a confessional mode of coming-out, Genet deployed self-creation and opacity. His words and choices reveal a homosexuality integrally tied up in betrayal, loneliness and departure: a mechanism by which he distanced himself from hetero-sociality. He wrote to affirm his solitude, to explore an entropic and centrifugal force within the social. This vantage point of the outsider produced in him a sense of affinity with the excluded and otherized, leading to his later engagements with various underground movements.

Baldwin's interviews likewise reveal that he considered himself a stranger in gay America, and America at large. He didn't understand the word "gay", and was disinterested in the roleplaying he perceived in the word. Even "homosexual" didn't seem to fit right. He saw gay life as a tribal culture from which he experienced a marked distance. As a maverick, he claimed membership in no group or party. Matters of his sexuality and love were absolutely personal; matters between him and the divine, unmediated by any church. He wrote about them in order to clarify something for himself, something about his place in the world. He said: "there's nothing in me that is not in

everybody else, and nothing in everybody else that is not in me. We're trapped in language, of course, but 'homosexual' is not a noun. At least not in my book... perhaps a verb. You see, I can only talk about my own life. I loved a few people and they loved me. It had nothing to do with these labels. Of course, the world has all kinds of words for us. But that's the world's problem."

These singular matters were only made public by the interference of institutions (the church, the state, etc.) and so Baldwin had no interest in seeking acceptance from those very institutions. Being black, and being sexually deviant, he found himself alienated from the politics of representation and inclusion. His relationship to his own perceived importance to the gay phenomenon, like Genet's, remained complicated. If anything he saw himself as a witness to it, without any interest in being its leader or spokesperson. If he refused leadership of the gay movement, he was precluded from such a role in the civil rights movement. Many referred to him as "Martin Luther Queen."[†] A *Time* magazine article from 1963 described him as a "nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears. He is effeminate in manner, drinks considerably, smokes cigarettes in chains, and he often loses his audiences with overblown statements," and emphasized that he could not be claimed "by any stretch of the imagination as a Negro leader." On the one hand, he

[†] In "The Color of Discipline", Thaddeus Russell argues that "The construction of [Martin Luther] King himself as the masculine symbol of the movement was a deliberate attempt to remove the image of black deviancy and show that African Americans could be good citizens. The public King [was] nearly always clad in a conservative business suit and frequently photographed in affectionate poses with his wife and children...." Russell situates this symbolism within a broader political strategy of the Civil Rights Movement to exclude queerness from a newly forged heteronormative image of the black community. Within this politics of the Family and masculinity, a queen like Baldwin could only figure as an outlier.

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These passages hauntingly resonate together because of what they each, in turn, say about our fight in the present. In both we find the image of a sort of inhuman birth, a birth necessitated by history and time, a corporeal rupture born not out of procreation but out of death. In them the mother has been displaced, and she instead takes on the role of witness to the bloody happening. From each we hear an invocation of a celestial force—whether of a holy ghost or of a constellation above—which in one way or another announces the immanent destruction of whiteness and its world. 

felt himself alien to a politics of white homosexuality concerned with achieving the benefits promised to whiteness. On the other, he was acutely aware of his exclusion from a politics based on a strong family and masculine virility. He responded to Eldridge Cleaver's invective against him by writing:

He seemed to feel that I was a dangerously odd, badly twisted, and fragile reed... I was confused in his mind with the unutterable debasement of the male—with all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him vomit more than once. Well, I certainly hope I know more about myself, and the intention of my work than that, but I am an odd quantity. So is Eldridge; so are we all. It is a pity that we won't, probably, ever have the time to attempt to define once more the relationship of the odd and disreputable artist to the odd and disreputable revolutionary.... These two seem doomed to stand forever at an odd and rather uncomfortable angle to each other, and they both stand at a sharp and not always comfortable angle to the people they both, in their different fashions, hope to serve. But I think that it is just as well to remember that the people are one mystery and that the person is another. Though I know what a very bitter and delicate and dangerous conundrum this is, it yet seems to me that a failure to respect the person so dangerously limits one's perception of the people that one risks betraying them and oneself....

This uncomfortable and dangerous angle towards the “mystery of the people” and toward the revolutionaries who'd serve them, revealed to him the problem always posed in the invocation of a people. Peoples are forged through the exclusion of certain persons and the forcing of others into familial relationships of violence and constraint. It is no mystery, then, that struggles for nationhood—the governmental and political elevation of kinship

bonds through the fantasy of “blood”—or for assimilation and citizenship consistently employ a significant degree of internal sexual and gendered control. Baldwin, being a stranger among peoples (gay, black, American, otherwise) could only laugh at a politics that proposes the necessary strength or vitality of any given people.

In their distances, we clearly recognize Genet and Baldwin as friends. The otherness expressed by both figures provides a certain paradoxical comfort, if only because we too feel an estrangement from the so-called “communities” of our time (the assimilationist ones, obviously, but also the supposedly “radical queer” and the revolutionary milieus). As we think through the questions of struggle and revolt, it serves us to invoke their sense of humility, otherness, dissonance, and interiority. From a space of distance—a queer space—we’ll hazard the trap of language in order to perhaps clarify some things about ourselves and our world.

Ending the Family Name

In 1972 James Baldwin published *No Name in the Street*, a memoir of his travels through the US and contributions to the black liberation movement of the preceding years. The book gives testimony to a decade of assassinations, repression, and terror. With this document of pessimism he attempted to sift through the defeat of the civil rights movement. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X bookend the text and figure prominently in Baldwin’s pessimism. In his words, with King’s death, “something altered in me, something went away.” He buried his last hope for a country he had all but forsaken with King. In the aftermath he set about an aimless wandering

And Genet’s:

A few hours after Jackson’s death, I had this half-waking dream: nine months apart, or thereabouts, Jonathan and George violently came out of the prison, a stony womb, on waves of blood. This expulsion was like the delivery of twins confounded in their identical age. It was not their mother who gave birth to them that night, for she was there, upright, impassive but alert, looking on. If it was a new birth, at once into life and into death, who but History was delivering the two black men covered, as with every birth, in blood....

George and Jonathan, two black Gemini, are not the modern version of the mythology that rose from the abyss or descended from Heaven. They simply remind us that we must carry out a human labor directed against the dense and sparkling mythology of the white world. We must look closely... at all imprisoned blacks—whether in jail or the ghetto—who are in danger at every moment of being assassinated like George and Jonathan Jackson, or of being wasted away by the white world. In fact, we must learn to betray the whites that we are.

Baldwin's:

This book has been much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair. Nor is the American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis, likely to resolve itself soon. An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill.... There will be bloody holding actions all over the world, for years to come: but the Western party is over, and the white man's sun has set. Period....

Angela Davis is still in danger. George Jackson has joined his beloved baby brother, Jon, in the royal fellowship of death. And one may say that Mrs. Georgia Jackson and the alleged mother of God have, at last, found something in common. Now, it is the Virgin, the alabaster Mary, who must embrace the despised black mother whose children are also the issue of the Holy Ghost.

that lead him away from the United States for good, writing the book in that time of wandering.

Baldwin laced his narrative throughout with an apocalyptic sense of time. He frequently referenced “these last and evil days,” and his “bleak, pale, cold wonder about the future.” He described that over America “hangs a miasma of fury and frustration, a perceptible darkening, as of storm clouds of rage and despair,” and he imagined a day “when this country’s absolutely inescapable disaster levels it.” The American people themselves are figured as “the disasters they’d become.” For Baldwin, the world was ending, but rather than fire and brimstone, he saw the black struggle “facing an army, facing a citizenry, facing white fathers, facing white mothers, facing the progeny of these co-citizens, facing the white past, to say nothing of the white present.” If he esteemed the American people to be part and parcel of the apocalypse, he had no confidence regarding the good intentions of liberal white America or their “nagging sense that they must do something” or their desire to pledge some financial contributions in order to be “off the hook.” This distrust cohered into a skeptical view of the social movement of the time:

We could petition and petition, march and march, and raise money and give money until we wore ourselves out and the stars began to moan: none of this endeavor would or could reach the core of the matter, it would change nobody’s fate. The thirty thousand dollars raised tonight would be gone in bail bonds in the morning, and so it would continue until we dropped. Nothing would ever reach the conscience of the people of this nation—it was a dream to suppose that the people of any nation had a conscience. Some individuals within the nation might, and the nation always saw to it that these people came to a bad, if not a bloody end. Nothing we could do would prevent, at last, and open confrontation.

Despite his belief in an inevitable “open confrontation,” Baldwin viewed Martin Luther King Jr. as one of the few figures who might possibly avert it. King’s death crushed Baldwin because Martin had made him hope in spite of his better sense. Baldwin recounted watching the march on Washington with a sense of impossible optimism that “the beloved community would not forever remain that dream one dreamed in agony.” He located a naïve belief, if only momentarily, that the peaceful petitioning of grievances might amount to their meaningful redress. This hope died in Birmingham when a bomb blew four little girls into oblivion and amounted to, in Baldwin’s words, “the first answer we received to our petition.”

He reflected years later, after Martin and Malcolm were both dead, that it was hard to believe a frontal assault against the Capitol that day could possibly have produced more bloodshed or despair. The emergence and repression of the Black Panther Party in the coming years only served to confirm his suspicions that any movement among black people in the US for dignity and for life would be met with “the ferocity of the repression, the storm of fire and blood which the Panthers have been forced to undergo merely for declaring themselves as men—men who want ‘land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace.’”

If we pause here to assess the situations unfolding in the past year, Baldwin’s analysis proves haunting and brutal. After all, didn’t we too hear friends’ tales and watch the fires of Ferguson and Baltimore and dare to believe in the emergence of something we’d long abandoned hope for? In the following months a movement we hadn’t imagined (small in comparison to past generations, surely, but remarkable for ours) emerged and began to approach things that daydreams scarcely would. This movement proclaimed that *black lives matter* and in doing so opened up a series of questions as to how exactly to go about

time and space upon which certain politics justify themselves; it is the imagined future community that all politics presuppose. We’ll name civilization itself as the libidinal container of all such fantastic ground. Baldwin and Genet’s revolts, but also our own, play in a space outside the limits of civilization—outside the psychic structures of language, identity, *the Family, the Child, the Great House* and its *Welcome Table*. If we wish to destroy the conditions of our—and so many others’—exclusion, it is out of a desire to abolish all that separates and alienates us from this sensual world and from each other. After all, the Fool’s journey is completed—by way of the madness of the Moon, the vitality of the Sun, and the cosmological mysteries of the Star—with entrance onto the World. Those who wander truly have no name in the street. Continuing outside that house—beyond domestication—means forgoing surname, ending the line, defying its *nomos*. We seek this in that great betrayal of the human family: to create ourselves on our own terms, to connect and co-conspire, to forge a new ecstatic communication, to discover and grow worlds from which to attack—to flip the *Welcome Table*, to burn the *Great House*.

Epilogue

We’ll end with the words that the two writers penned almost simultaneously, to eulogize George Jackson.

At close, in Genet and in Baldwin we find an impulse toward connection and revolt not based upon a morality or on a programmatic politic, but upon the ineffable lived reality that exceeds these discourses. For both of them, the work of art was an attempt at an uncontrollable communication that overflows the limits and points toward the outside of civilized language[†]. We could call this discursive space, following Wilderson, the “third term mediator.” But this interlocutor is more than just the specificities of

The novel, and Baldwin, remain committed nonetheless to the hope of dismantling the armored identities that keep self and other, inside and outside, resolutely, if arbitrarily distinct. *Just Above My Head* insists on the necessary permeability of such identities, even in the face of its candid acknowledgement of the risks such permeability can entail; and it offers, near the end, a paradigm for that receptive openness to what is ‘foreign’.

† In his meditation on music and language, *In the Break*, Fred Moten critically augmented Edelman’s reading (cited in the preceding footnote) by emphasizing the significance of the characters singing together after the scene above. Moten insists that “the primal scene must be heard; one must be attuned to its sound and perhaps, then, even to a real reformulation of, rather than dismissal of, spirit.” He criticizes Edelman’s “valorization of language [...] as pure form,” arguing instead for an “attunement to sound [...] revealed as the literary experience of a psychic imprint.” A focus on the sound obscured by language opens us to Baldwin’s “libidinal drive toward ever greater unities of the sensual,” or the “erotic drive that now can be theorized in its most intense relation to the drive for, and knowledge of, freedom.” Moten finds in Baldwin something unheard in language, “something transferred to him from the way back and way before wounded kinship, forced and stolen labor, forced and stolen sexuality.” He wants to “open up” this substance because,

as Baldwin knows, as Edelman knows both because and in spite of the analytic he deploys and to which he is given, to receive the blessing of this substance—to see and hear and touch and smell and taste it; to receive the gift that does not cohere but exists in its abounding of its own internal space; to receive and in so doing to acknowledge the fact of the whole as a kind of distance: this is what it is to linger in the music.

destroying those institutions and apparatuses that deny that simple assertion.

Tragically it seems the arc has shortened; or perhaps time has intensified. History perhaps moves in neither a line nor a circle, but rather a spiral. Already an escalation of murder and terror at the hands of white supremacists (whether in police uniforms or not) has answered the petitions. If we had wagered that the threat of rioting might make an officer hesitate before pulling the trigger, police nationwide have disabused us of such a notion. If anything, since Ferguson, police departments have intensified their campaign of racial terror. Already over seven hundred[†] people have been killed by police in the US and the year is only halfway through, all while spree shootings and arsons of black churches have become a norm. Viewed in the course of a larger scope of time, the situation appears all the bleaker. Today, we couldn’t disagree with Baldwin’s assessment in his final interview (shortly before his death in 1987) that since King’s death “everything is worse.” It’s no secret that the end and supposed success of that movement corresponded to the beginning of a massive expansion of the prison system in the US. The United States currently keeps as many people in cages (a larger prison population than any nation in the world) as were enslaved in 1840. Baldwin’s apocalyptic narrative reads as if it were written yesterday, but the state’s repressive apparatus has grown in ways almost beyond comprehension. It appears that we’ve reached an impasse in our understanding of social movements. Innumerable commentators have spent countless words on the events of the past year, but we remain without a way to talk about the apparent futility of these attempts to dislodge white supremacy, or even slow

† This statistic needed to be updated with each subsequent draft of this paper, illustrating a disturbing escalation in the past weeks alone. In the year since Michael Brown’s death on August 9, 2014, police in the US killed at least 1083 people.

the rate of police murder. We hear so much about “riots as protest” or about the necessity of “strong communities” to “make police obsolete,” but next to nothing about how exactly we might go about dismantling the apparatus of policing itself. We are at a loss and to say otherwise requires a tremendous dishonesty.

Politics fails us, language fails us, but Baldwin exposed this decades ago. He criticized the failures of language and understanding, and in his doing so we can see his influence on contemporary theorists such as Frank Wilderson III and Saidiya Hartman[†]. In his critique of language, we read him as a sort of proto-Afro-pessimist. He said:

you see, whites want black writers to mostly deliver something as if it were an official version of the black experience. But the vocabulary won’t hold it; simply. No true account, really, of black life can be held, can be contained in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing a great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based.

A call for such a violence against the preconditions of language coincides with Frank Wilderson’s commentary on recent anti-police rioting in the US. In a radio interview shortly after the first wave of rioting in Ferguson, he spoke to the near-impossibility of language to convey the experience of black people, in the US, in their confrontation with the police[‡]. He described the burden put on himself and others to come out against

[†] For an introduction to both, of significance to the present conversation, see Saidiya Hartman interviewed by Frank Wilderson III in “The Position of the Unthought”.

[‡] Originally aired on the “I Mix What I Like” radio show, a transcript of the interview is available in the zine “We’re Trying to Destroy the World”, published by Ill Will Editions. (ill-will-editions.tumblr.com)

Like Genet, he imagined an excess—of passion, of joy, of emotion—which continues after death. His inversion of the metaphor, between memory as vehicle and us as vehicle, likewise inverted the boundary between outside and inside. Are we contained within memory, or is it within us? Do the memories and violences of the libidinal nightmare contain us or do we contain them? In this sense, we—and all the subjections which compose us—figure as the enfleshment of all the operations of order, morality, and fantasy of civilization. And so the point is an overcoming of this containment, a stepping outside of ourselves, *ek-stasis*. Baldwin points to the potential of this overcoming, later in the book, in a sex scene between two characters, where he writes:

It was incredible that it hurt so much, and yet, hurt so little, that so profound an anguish, thrusting so hard, so deep, accomplished such a transformation, I looked at my hands and they looked new, I looked at my feet and they did too! But that is how they sang, really, something like fifteen minutes later, out of the joy of their surrender and deliverance, out of their secret knowledge that each contained the other.

This paradox by which two people might contain one another ruptures both the coherence of the forces that structure them as individuals, but also boldly defies the sexual order that Baldwin decried. It is an exploding of the binaries of in and out, top and bottom, self and other, which caused him to gesture toward an overcoming of what history has made us through a connection to those it has rendered our others. Baldwin staked his belief in a fleeting ecstatic possibility on this impulse and openness toward connection with another.[†]

[†] Lee Edelman, who we’ll steal from again in his reading of *Just Above My Head*, wrote:

A little while ago, I wrote that though I shall die, nothing else will. And I must make my meaning clear. Wonder at the sight of a cornflower, at a rock, at the touch of a rough hand—all the millions of emotions of which I'm made—they won't disappear even though I shall. Other men will experience them, and they'll still be there because of them. More and more I believe I exist in order to be the terrain and proof which show other men that life consists in the uninterrupted emotions flowing through all creation. The happiness my hand knows in a boy's hair will be known by another hand, is already known. And although I shall die, this happiness will live on. 'I' may die, but what made that 'I' possible, what made possible the joy of being, will make the joy of being live on without me.

This imagined continuity of sensation and experience after the withering away of the "I", of "Jean Genet" gave Genet a surety of purpose toward the end of his life. This connection, unmediated by identity and language, feels intimately related to what he recognized as the "uncontrollable communication" among the various rebels of his time. Communication here is imagined as inseparable from connection to life, to eros. The above passage reads as contiguous with Baldwin's narrative in his last novel, *Just Above My Head*, where he wrote:

Memory is a strange vehicle. Or perhaps, we are the vehicle which carries the increasingly burdensome and mercurial passenger called memory.... [T]he event, the moment, engraved in me, which is me more surely than my given name is me: escapes my memory. Memory is mercurial and selective, but passion welds life and death together, riding outside and making no judgement. You are, yourself, the judgement.

police brutality or *police violence*, whereas he positions himself against *police in their entirety*. He argues that this sentiment appears nearly unsayable in the American vocabulary. For Wilderson, and we'll follow him here, no conceivable demand can be posed (or met) by which policing in this country could be disinherited of its lineage of slave-catching and the suppression of revolt; there are no reforms to be made. By his account, black people have nothing to ask for. (Current events confirmed his argument shortly after the interview when Barack Obama and some progressives began—in the name of "transparency" and "accountability"—calling for a proliferation of surveillance by means of body cameras on police officers. This parody became farce almost immediately when a New York grand jury found no crime in the police murder of Eric Garner, despite the entire incident being caught on camera.) For Wilderson, the irreducible enmity of black people toward the police—their non-demand—registers as incomprehensible in the white imaginary. Recognizing an aversion to the demand-form reveals something interesting about the post-facto naming of the movement emerging out of Ferguson as Black Lives Matter. Rather than coalescing around a set of piecemeal reforms to policing or this or that party or demand, participants in the riots and blockages simply affirm their lives. While one could read this as a lowest common denominator humanism which everybody should at least be able to support, there exists a way of reading wherein this simple assertion opens an unmediated hostility with all the institutions and apparatuses which impede those lives. This hostility could open onto a confrontation with the linguistic, libidinal, and psychic structures that determine "mattering" as such.

Wilderson bases his arguments (around the futility of demand) on his efforts elsewhere to illustrate the failure of metaphor in the struggle for black liberation. In

“The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement”,[†] Wilderson argues that the combatants of the Black Liberation Army, unlike their counterparts in the Red Army Faction or the Irish Republican Army, have no recourse to what he calls “third term mediators.” In his reading of the communiqués of these groups, he identifies the ways in which the RAF and IRA combatants justify confrontation with their enemy by means of symbolically fighting on behalf of a people or a nation. In their texts, concepts such as “the people,” “the nation,” “the land,” or “the working class” function as a sort of spatial grounding-wire between the fighters and their enemy, which absorbs the shock of violent action. These interlocutors function temporally also—as in a crisis or period of repression—and likewise justify armed action. Wilderson argues that black people in the US cannot claim these spatial or temporal grounding wires: they have no native land on which to stake a claim, and their situation is inextricable from hundreds of years of incarceration, slavery and domination which passes for normality. As evidenced by his reading of Assata Shakur’s communiqués (written following her arrest, a year after the publication of *No Name in the Street*), he argues that black combatants cannot successfully invoke a common interlocutor with their enemy. He figures them as barred from understanding as familial agents fighting over a shared metanarrative of nation, class or people. As such, their violence takes on an unmediated quality; their words speak directly within the registers of sensation, emotion, pain, and desire for love.

The reaction of various white nationalists to the “Black Lives Matter” riots and actions partially reveals the exile of black people from the fantasy of familial common ground in the United States. One example is the neo-Nazi skinheads who took to patrolling downtown

exile from the familial structure of the West compelled him to travel amidst those peoples excluded from that structure. His affinity was tied up in his exile. Baldwin experienced a double exclusion—from white America, but also from the attempts at forging a new black nation or family—and for that reason fled to Paris and met Genet at a dive along the banks of the Seine. Little has been written about the content of their early friendship, but one can only imagine what they discussed at those early meetings and frequent dinners together. One can perhaps get a sense of their influence on one another in reading *The Blacks* and *Giovanni’s Room* alongside each other, or likewise in their later respective commitments to the use of poetic weaponry. This type of alien affinity underscores what we find so dangerous in both writers. I will always remember when I first discovered Genet’s writing. Those first few pages of *The Thief’s Journal* resonated on a frequency deeper than I had known the written word could. Stealing that book in that moment had an immeasurably affirmative quality in my life; a quality only confirmed later upon learning of Genet’s early arrests for shoplifting Proust and others. As Baldwin put it:

If you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms with which you are connected to other lives, and they can discover, too, the terms with which they are connected to other people. You read something which you thought happened only to you, and you discovered it happened on hundred years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a very great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone.

Genet takes this impulse toward connection further when describing in *Prisoner of Love*—his final writing—a sort of mystical immanence of sensuality which allows for connection beyond the veil of death:

64 | † Also available from Ill Will Editions.

in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact—this may sound strange—you have to decide who you are, and force the world to deal with you.

This image of individuation through departure is ever-present in our collective imaginary in traveller archetypes. In its normative conception, this archetype plays a crucial aspect of youth: to leave, in order to return and take one's place at the welcome table. But the lives of Genet and Baldwin exceed the limits of the archetype in its domesticated form; in reading them, we find records of two who left, never to return. Their lives and works were the efforts of outsiders to describe and decry the society around them, but never to mediate a place for themselves within it. We want to explore this unwillingness to return. What's at stake for us—in queerness and in revolt—is to permanently have done with the great human Family. A return to this family, this great terrible psychic structure, poses the danger in that trap of inclusion. For that reason, a Justice of the Supreme Court, in reference to the newly legal institution of gay marriage, says: "their hope, is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions." While only one tiny example of a vast issue, it nonetheless begs the question: what of we who stake no claim to a place in that institution? (And we're speaking here of something different than those pseudo-critics of "assimilation" who want *different* reforms, or *more inclusive* ones.) Far from a resignation to a life of loneliness, we wager that only in disappearing and vowing to not return might we achieve the alchemy necessary to find others doing the same.

The permanent exile and wandering of both Baldwin and Genet was also the precondition for their friendship and later collaborations. In the case of Genet, his

Olympia, Washington after a handful of anti-police demonstrations. These skinheads declared that their presence was necessary to "secure a future for white children" against the threat of "black insurrection." Another example is the Ku Klux Klan organized "confederate flag" rally in Columbia, South Carolina which called on whites to "defend their heritage" from the threat posed to it by recent Black Lives Matter mobilizations. Taken together the "pro-police" and "pro-heritage" sentiments pay homage to the history of policing as the delineating apparatus of humanness in the United States (both in the sense of the systematic domination of black people by police, but also of membership in police departments as a mechanism for the assimilation of various ethnic groups into whiteness [i.e. Italians, Irish and Polish communities in the last century]). In both cases, the partisans of the white nation aspire to secure the temporal continuity of their imagined family—in terms of their historical inheritance and also their children's future—from the threat of blackness.[‡] While obviously extreme examples, the same impulse to defend the symbolic coherence of the "third term mediator"—whiteness, the Family, the Children, etc.—from an incommensurate blackness reveals itself everywhere in the discourse around racialized struggles. For all their radical airs, the managers of revolt are no less afraid of the specter of blackness. We hear their condemnation in thinly coded appeals to respectability, in shaming of "unreasonable" looters and rioters, in the attempted mobilization of benevolent "white allies" to organize as a white block supporting the self-supposed "leadership" of politicians and non-profits, in the discursive shift from "Black Lives Matter" toward "All Lives Matter," or in the way the media

[‡] We take a great amount of joy in being able to report that in both situations, the white nationalists were dealt with in a visceral and unmediated way.

describes white spree-shooters as “deviants” or “mysterious drifters” while simultaneously elevating individual “crimes” on the part of black people to synecdoches of an entire race.[†]

An ontological abjection emerges here: a disjunction in being and language, which Baldwin (like Wilderson) attributes to the experience of blackness in the United States. We almost hear Frank when James described his experiences in the US differing from those of Algerians in France.

They thus, held something within them which they would never surrender to France. But on my side of the Ocean... we had surrendered everything, or had had everything taken away, and there was no place for us to go: we were home. The Arabs were together in Paris, but the American blacks were alone.

He viewed the situation of colonial subjects as being “more coherent” than his own and described how, “as I began to discern what their history had made of them, I began to suspect, somewhat painfully, what my history had made of me.” Baldwin illustrates here the failure of the analogy upon which the nation thesis and the last century’s fantasy of a possible coalition between nationalisms (of various coherent peoples struggling together as nations for their respective liberations) rests. For him the black subject in

† This tendency toward synecdoche—the elevation of a part to a representation of the whole—appears in the way that acts of violence carried out by Arabs and Muslims are portrayed in the west as “terrorism” compared to those same acts being “mental illness” among white actors. And yet, not all synecdoches are the same; whereas the specter of Muslim terrorism is conceived of by politicians and talking heads as a “clash of civilizations,” the specter of black uprising is never thought in those terms. This is worth bearing in mind while reading the arguments in the following paragraphs.

from a paradise which was itself but another circle of hell. Everything that charmed me reminded me of someplace else, someplace where I could walk and talk, someplace where I was freer than I was at home, someplace where I could live without the stifling mask—made me homesick for a liberty I had never tasted here, and without which I could never live or work. In America, I was free only in battle, never free to rest—and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle.

Driven by their conditions, and more so by their own indomitable refusal of them, these two were in a sort of perpetual exile. Their undying need to travel flowed directly from each one’s sense of their own alienness in an enemy society. Baldwin:

For it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything—everything, from the question of one’s identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one’s life in order to begin to live it.

Genet:

Excluded by my birth and tastes from the social order, I was not aware of its diversity. Nothing in the world was irrelevant; the stars on a general’s sleeve, the stock-market quotations, the olive harvest, the style of the judiciary, the wheat exchange, flower-beds. Nothing. This order, fearful and feared, whose details were all interrelated, had a meaning: my exile.[†]

In a sense, this permanent exile is an aspect of the same self-creating magic that Genet situated in the writing of a prisoner; it is another way of being in limbo, of determining oneself and one’s life. Baldwin puts it this way:

† In *The Thief’s Journal*.

soon?" I saw that the Panthers were thrown off by this. They were used to moving quickly, but I was moving more quickly than they. All because I was living in a hotel. I had one small suitcase. If I had an apartment, would I have been able to do that? If I had friendships, would I be able to move around with the same speed?

Baldwin conceived of his wandering as the "deliberate repudiation of everything and everyone that had given me an identity up until that moment." He said:

I was a maverick, a maverick in the sense that I depended on neither the white world nor the black world. That was the only way I could've played it. I would've been broken otherwise. I had to say "a curse on both your houses," the fact that I went to Europe so early is probably what saved me. It gave me another touchstone—myself.

By his account, only by leaving was he able to see the world for what it was. When he returned to New York, he returned as an "aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak"—certainly no longer the person his friends and family had known—a stranger. Returning home, he was forced to face the life from which he'd spent so many years in flight. Through his writing he revealed his inability to achieve the normative conclusion often figured as the counterpoint to leaving. Life offered him no redemption in return. Even when he wanted to rest, it wasn't really an option for him:

My desire to be seduced, charmed, was a hope poisoned by despair: for better or for worse, it simply was not in me to make a separate peace. It was a symptom of how bitterly weary I was of wandering, how I hoped to find a resting place, reconciliation, in the land where I was born. But everything that might have charmed me merely reminded me of how many were excluded, how many were suffering and groaning and dying, not far

America cannot compose the same imagined nation. In his reading, the analogy doesn't hold.

In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin elucidates the same paradox labored over by contemporary theorists; the paradox by which the black subject is included in the West by the very nature of its exclusion as such. This inclusion underlies the singular condition of his abjection, and from this condition he spent his life attempting an escape. At various points in the text he says:

It is easy for an African to hate the invade and drive him out of Africa, but it is every difficult for an American Negro to do this. He obviously can't do this to white people; there's no place to drive them....

and,

We have created—no other nation has—a black man who belongs, who is a part of the West. In distinction to Belgium or any other European power, we had our slaves on the mainland. No matter how we deny it, we couldn't avoid a human involvement with them, which we have almost perished in denying, but which is nevertheless there....

and,

[F]our hundred years in the West has certainly turned me into a Westerner, there was no way around that. But four hundred years in the West had also failed to bleach me—there was no way around that either—and my history in the West had, for its daily effect, placed me in such mortal danger that I had fled.

These lines, together and separately, point toward the singularity and irreducibility of the black condition in the United States. This irreducibility provides substance to Wilderson's argumentation on this point. He exposes the untenable falsity of the dreams of inclusionary reforms, of

building a “black nation” in the South, or of some imagined return; an ontological paradox. Baldwin articulated this paradox years earlier in his 1965 debate with William F. Buckley. He argued, then that in spite of his ancestors being buried in American soil for hundreds of years, this civilization’s “system of reality” still couldn’t make space for him.

Baldwin’s writing as a whole, but especially in *No Name in the Street*, shares a great deal with contemporary queer and Afro-pessimist thinking because of his contributions to an understanding of the role of fantasy and libidinal structures—“systems of reality”—in the experience of domination. For this elaboration, all of us are particularly indebted to him. He theorized the domination of black people in the United States as inextricably tied up in the symbolic space of “blackness” within the white, Christian, imaginary. He put it this way:

This problem, which [white Americans] invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them; and this not from anything blacks may or may not be doing but because of the role a guilty and constricted white imagination has assigned to the blacks. That the scapegoat pays for the sins of others is well known, but this is only legend, and a revealing one at that. In fact, however the scapegoat may be made to suffer, his suffering cannot purify the sinner; it merely incriminates him the more, and it seals his damnation. The scapegoat, eventually, is released, to death: his murderer continues to live. The suffering of the scapegoat has resulted in seas of blood, and yet not one sinner has been saved, or changed, by this despairing ritual. Sin has merely been added to sin, and guilt piled upon guilt. In the private chambers of the soul, the guilty party is identified, and the accusing finger, there, is not legend, but consequence, not fantasy,

and seeming to say that God and the devil can never be divorced. I doubt that the villagers think of the devil when they face the cathedral because they have never been identified with the devil. But I must accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope to change the myth.[†]

For him, the possibility of escape and freedom was embodied in the wandering of the figure of the stranger.

Genet asked: “what is prison?” and answered: “It is immobility.” He appreciated that he lived a life that allowed for a certain irresponsibility. Having no responsibilities to speak of allowed him a sort of immediate engagement. When asked about deciding to travel to the US to join the Panthers:

When Bobby Seale was arrested two of the Panthers came to see me and asked me what I could do for Bobby. It was morning and I answered that the simplest thing would be for me to go to the US and see the situation. They asked “When?”—“How about tomorrow?”—“So

† There is something intriguing and promising in this act of looking upon the edifices of civilization by one of the devils (queer, black, witch or otherwise) upon whose exclusion it has been built. This is related, in a way to Alexander Weheliye’s reading of Sylvia Wynter. To quote:

Wynter’s commitment lies with disfiguring their real object, Man, through the incorporation of the colonial and racialist histories of the modern incantations of the human. This spot should be understood neither as an identitarian land claim concerned with particular borders of exclusion nor a universal *terra nullius*, but instead as a ceaselessly shifting relational assemblage that voyages in and out of the human. The cluster I am tracing here brings forth a “demonic ground” to versions of humanity unburdened by shackles of Man. Demonic ground is Sylvia Wynter’s term for perspectives that reside in the liminal precincts of the current governing configurations of the human as Man in order to abolish this figuration and create other forms of life.

Throughout their lives, Genet and Baldwin were each constantly leaving.

Baldwin established himself as a stranger early in his writing. In “Stranger in the Village” included at the end of *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, he described being the first black person to ever travel through a particularly remote Swiss village. In it he said that by assuming the role of a stranger he was able to recognize the history of black people in the US as “a nightmare from which no one *can* awaken.” By his account, he was a stranger there, whereas in America he could never be. In America he was known, and his presence there couldn’t be removed from centuries of domination and struggle. He said the white villagers were likewise not strangers, because anywhere in the world, they’d remain the inheritors of the legendary greatness with which their ancestors built the modern world; inheritors of the language by which their ancestors sought to control the universe by describing it. He argued then, more than a decade before *No Name in the Street*:

the idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (the present civilization, which is the only one that matters; all previous civilizations are simply “contributions” to our own) and are therefore civilization’s guardians and defenders. Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men.

He realized this while looking on the grand old churches of Europe as a stranger. Whereas white Europeans are able to look upon them with a sense of the grand nature of their inheritance, he looked upon them and saw

the slippery bottomless well to be found in the crypt, down which heretics were hurled to death, and [...] the obscene, inescapable gargoyles jutting out of the stone

but the truth. People pay for what they do, and, still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it very simply: by the lives they lead.

In *No Name in the Street* Baldwin described being sexually assaulted, groped by a powerful white man, and in doing so sketched the fundamental libidinal economy ensuring that the slave knows his master’s commercial and sexual license over him. He describes what Hortense Spillers has elsewhere talked about as the ungendering of the black body in its absolute availability for the enactment of white desire.[†] He invokes a contradictory (e)masculation in the act of this white man grabbing his cock—that organ of the black body which the white imaginary has invested with such a powerful cathexis. He bemoans the position of the black body as both threat and fantasy in this system of erotics. Throughout many of his novels and essays, he articulates the role of black people as tools in the hands of another, instruments of another’s will and pleasure. For him, the entirety of the white social order rests upon

† In her text “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, Hortense Spillers explores the ways in which, throughout the nightmare of chattel slavery, black subjects are excluded from the heteronormative familial structures which define white America, and are instead subject to the violent rupturing of their kinship relations (what Frederick Douglass would describe as a relation without fathers, or as “the order of civilization reversed”) and to universal and “ungendering” sexual violence at the hands of masters and overseers. Spillers illustrates the libidinal economy at play within the master/slave relation, but also the ways in which that economy is structured differently than the gender relations of white America. For her, the apparatuses which render black subjects as flesh always available for the pleasure of the masters also leave “hieroglyphics of the flesh” which mark all descendant black subjects as similarly available. Her argumentation helps us in considering the way that a variety of apparatuses, (slavery, police violence, sexual violence, CPS, etc.) render the black subject as outside the fantastic structure of the white heterosexual family. In a sense, she also then illustrates the precise futility of nationalist attempts to fight for the strength of this type of family.

this. “Behind the facade, of course, lives the city, furtive, paranoiac, puritanical, obsessed and in love with what it imagines to be sin—and also with what it imagines to be joy, it being difficult in Western culture to distinguish the two.” He said that black men are imagined as posing as much of a threat to the economy as to the “morals of white cheerleaders.” To the police occupying the ghettos, black men represent a “pale, compelling nightmare—an overwhelming collection of private nightmares.” Of them he says:

What they do see when they do look at you is what they have invested you with. What they have invested you with is all the agony, and pain, and the danger, and the passion, and the torment—you know, sin, death and hell—of which everyone in this country is terrified. As a Negro, you represent a level of experience which Americans deny... all the taboos placed on the flesh, and have at the same time in this country such a vivid example of a decent pagan imagination and the sexual liberty with which white people invest Negroes—and then penalize them for... it’s a guilt about flesh. In this country the Negro pays for the guilt which white people have about the flesh.

Baldwin’s narrative revelation of the libidinal underpinnings of police and judicial violence continues in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, where he describes sexual violence (and the threat thereof) inflicted upon black inmates by white guards. In his telling, such violence weaponizes and upholds both the sexual and racial orders of the time. If, as Wilderson and others have argued, the contemporary policing and prison system form a continuum with chattel slavery, then the reduction of black bodies to objects available for another—the foundation of that libidinal economy—continues into the present through those apparatuses. In the contemporary

Canada, just in time for the riots against the Democratic National Convention in Chicago where he meets Ginsberg, Burroughs and others. By 1970, Baldwin settles for good in France and Genet, at the request of the Panthers, sneaks once more into the US. He travels with them for two months, speaking on their behalf. In April, while in San Francisco, he is solicited by George Jackson’s lawyer to write the introduction to *Soledad Brother*, and on the first of May he speaks to a crowd of twenty-five thousand people demanding the release of the Panthers from prison. He travels to Brazil in July, where he completes the introduction he’d promised, and by October is back in Paris to join Baldwin at the American Center for a rally in solidarity with Jackson. Genet travels to Jordan, lured by rumors of a brewing intifada, and there writes “For George Jackson”. He intended to present the text himself at a rally for Jackson organized by Baldwin in London, but events in Jordan kept him and they were circulated in his absence. In August of 1971, Jackson is killed. By the end of that year, Genet will have written fifteen pieces in his defense and mourning his death. A few months later, delayed by assassinations and mourning, Baldwin finally publishes *No Name in the Street*, with an epilogue dedicated to Jackson. In the spring of 1986, Genet dies in his hotel while editing *Prisoner of Love*, a memoir of his time with the Panthers. He is buried on a hill in Morocco. In December of the following year Baldwin, in turn, dies in exile.

Strangers in Exile

In March 1944, Jean Genet is freed from prison and never reenters. In 1948, James Baldwin flees the US for France, vowing to never return. In the following years, the two writers frequent the Reine Blanche, a gay bar along the Seine in Paris; they become friends and are said to dine together frequently. In 1955, Genet begins writing The Blacks (his mockery of racial and judicial order) and finishes in 1958; he spends the subsequent year traveling through nearly a dozen countries. Meanwhile, Baldwin writes Giovanni's Room (that novel of betrayal and murder) and publishes it in 1956, and in 1957 returns to America saying that it was time to "pay his dues." In 1961, The Blacks is put on by the St. Marks Playhouse in New York City, starring Maya Angelou; Baldwin, a friend of Angelou's and Genet's, can't help but attend and advise the rehearsals. The play runs for four years. At the close of that fourth year, 1965, Genet attempts to enter the United States, but is turned away at the border as a sexual deviant. He spends the next several years traveling the world while Baldwin travels the US, embroiling himself in the black struggle. In the spring of 1968, MLK is assassinated, and with him dies Baldwin's last hope for America—he sets about a sort of aimless wandering that lasts for years, leaving the US for the last time. A few weeks later, rumors of an outbreak of student revolts lure Genet back to France. A few months later, unsatisfied, he succeeds in sneaking into the US, by way of

fantasy structures of the US, sexualized and criminalized black bodies figure as available for consumption by another. This is evidenced by the institutionalization of prison rape and by the pornotroping of that violence; by rampant sexual assault of black men by prison guards and police officers; by inmates in San Francisco's county jail made to fight "gladiator style" for the entertainment of the guards; by the fetishistic portrayals in the porn industry of chattel slavery, policing, and imprisonment. Particularly grotesque is a recent performance by the Museum of Modern Art's first poet laureate, Kenneth Goldsmith. Goldsmith, who in recent months was invited to read at the White House, cut up and read Michael Brown's autopsy report as a poem entitled, "The Body of Michael Brown." In the performance, he surveils and spectacularizes the dead body of Michael Brown. In dispassionately reading the details of the coroner's report and dwelling upon a description of Brown's penis, he invokes and exploits all the pornotropic stuff of the libidinal fantasy inextricable from the order that mandated Brown's death. Goldsmith inadvertently illustrates the complicity of the avant-garde with social order's psychic center.

In the interview, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats", Baldwin clarified that the libidinal nightmare space that black people occupy also constitutes the conditions of heteronormative domination in the US. He called this domination a "terror of the flesh, a doctrine which has led to untold horrors." He saw the sexual and racial questions as intertwined in the white imaginary. He argued that society reveals its will through police officers and other masculine figures who need faggots as a receptacle upon which to enact their own sexual fantasies, to displace what they cannot acknowledge in themselves onto the body of another.

I think it's very important for the male homosexual to recognize that he is a sexual target for other men, and that is why he is despised, and why he is called a faggot. He is called a faggot because other men need him.

We can read Baldwin as indicting homophobic violence as co-constitutive of the racialized sexual violence of the white social order. The “terror of the flesh” is, for Baldwin, tied up in the terror inflicted upon the flesh by slave-masters, police officers, and prison guards. This emasculation and inscription of black bodies into a hierarchical sexual ordering relies on the same psychic violence constitutive of homophobia. And yet, unfortunately for Baldwin, this psychic violence often remains intact or unchallenged in the resistant struggles to reclaim a “castrated” masculinity. Baldwin elsewhere described the ways he saw black men “battle for humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to [them] at birth.” The maintenance of the psycho-sexual order in the struggle for family, masculinity, and nation—which so alienated Baldwin—can still be seen today in the rhetoric of resistance to the police and the courts they serve.[†] Baldwin illustrated in “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” that the structure of heterosexual masculinity is not necessarily a black thing, but an *American* thing. We might expand this and say that it is a *national* thing—a thing related to the fantasy of any nation composed of blood ties and elevated fam-

† For an example from contemporary anthems of street fighting, we could look at the line in “G-Code” by Geto Boys about not testifying because “I ain’t gay,” which codes collaboration as queer and resistance as predicated on an innate masculinity. Or the NWA line—“I don’t know if they’re fags or what?”—about sexual violence against black men on the part of police officers. Here, this type of routine violation, euphemized as “frisking”, is figured as a queer act which implicates the police, but also those who do not resist. In both we see the struggle against the State’s racialized sexual violence abiding by those same “brutal criteria” that reproduce it.

Like Baldwin, Genet insisted on the need for a new language—a new type of communication—and he believed the Panthers to be discovering one:

there are at least two types of communication, then, a mode that is recognizable, controllable and one that is uncontrollable. The Panther’s action had more to do with the uncontrollable kind of communication.

He saw in them a revolution of an affective and emotional order:

The Panthers put into play an entire affectivity that we lack, and this affectivity did not come from the fact that they were of African descent, that they’re black; it’s simply that they’re banished, they’ve been banished and outlawed for four centuries, and they found each other again in the expression ‘brothers’. This fraternity is not possible if you’re thinking of a global revolution, or so it seems to me. You can’t talk about that if you don’t have a very long stretch of time out ahead of you.

This connection, this relationality in banishment, this uncontrollable communication, possessed an intense erotic charge for Genet. It was this connection, which he’d elsewhere call love, that he felt among the Panthers. His affinities and solidarities were always tied up in desire. As we’re attempting to sketch a critique of the libidinal underpinnings of civilization, Genet offers a mode of revolt in the libidinal field. After all, wasn’t desire at the root of his own enmity toward society? He described a dimension of playing a game: being banned from the US and having to enter and travel clandestinely created a tremendous sense of enjoyment for him. Eroticism, enjoyment, insolence, exile, destruction: these were the markers of Genet’s poetic insurgency.

also in other ways; in a ritual or ritualized form in the Carnival. At certain moments, the entire people wants to be liberated, wants to indulge in the phenomenon of potlatch, of complete destruction and total expenditure, it needs violence.

For Genet, entrance into such a carnivalesque energy proved and expanded one's freedom. The decision to take up revolutionary activity constituted a murderous act against the social roles of the racial order; like Jackson's, a refusal to enslave or be enslaved. Rather than describing this act as "a struggle", he imagined it as a betrayal:

The word "betrayal" causes the mind to recoil; this is because feudal morality condemned it, and this condemnation still weighs on us because we have not yet rid ourselves of this mentality. In order to be what is called chivalrous—still a prestigious word—we end up remaining faithful to people or to institutions who demand from us the worst kind of abjection.

At a time when adherents of struggle demand "faith, loyalty, honor", this serves as a welcome provocation.

Genet imagined a sort of destructive intoxication, a betrayal of the institutions which demand our loyalty. He applauded all those who refuse subservience to these institutions, in whatever way. To be clear, the grandest institution in question is that Great House, the Welcome Table, the Family. Genet's queerness, tied intimately as it was to the concept of betrayal, betrayed first of all this family. For him, poetic revolution, alongside the Panthers and others, realized his desire for the antifamilial betrayal he imagined.

Having no home, and no family, Genet felt more at home among the Panthers than at any other point in his life. He described being welcomed immediately among them, as if he himself was "a black whose color is pink."

ily structures. Thaddeus Russell argues persuasively that "the price of admission to American society for African Americans would be a surrender to heterosexual norms," and that the movements for middle-class inclusion, civil rights or nationalism often went hand-in-hand with a tightening of gendered and sexual control, as well as a paranoia against sexual deviance.[‡]

‡ An example given by Russell in "The Color of Discipline", which illustrates the shift from the New York City Baldwin left toward the one he returned to:

In the late 1920s, as the drag balls gained popularity among the African American working class, black queers came under attack from the leaders of the early civil rights movement. It was probably no coincidence that the campaign to purge queerness from black life began immediately after the white moral reform society called the Committee of Fourteen released its first report on Harlem and declared it to be the most vice-ridden neighborhood in New York City. The campaign was initiated by Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor of the powerful Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, a leader of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League, the standard-bearer for the black middle-class, and perhaps the most famous African American clergyman and civil rights leader at the time. In... a series of sermons [Powell] claimed ['sexual perversion'] was 'steadily increasing' in large American cities.... According to Powell, the individual pursuit of pleasure over the obligations of community was both the cause and consequence of homosexuality. The indulgence in the sensual pleasures that were newly available to the great numbers of recent black arrivals in the cities was "causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying." Homosexuality, one of "the powers which tend to debase the race," was a rejection of the familial responsibility that held the black community together and made it a viable political entity. From this perspective, homosexuals were the products and purveyors of a broader urban culture that clashed with the ethic of self-sacrifice and communal responsibility at the core of citizenship. The fact that Powell's attack immediately followed the

If Baldwin saw this “terror of the flesh” and the horrors of the American libidinal economy as underwriting the militancy of certain tendencies within the black liberation movement, he likewise recognized it in the motivations of the white liberals of his time. He noted in *No Name in the Street* that their desire was no less structured by the psychic relation of black men’s availability for consumption. In staying consistent with his pessimism, he insisted that they too needed a particular fantasy of black militancy to play out the “familiar rage confirming the reality of white power and sensuously inflaming a bizarre species of guilty eroticism without which, I am beginning to believe, most white Americans of the more or less liberal persuasion cannot draw a single breath.” In other words, it was important for black people to suffer so white people could feel guilty and maybe even do something to assuage their guilt.

This underlying psychic relation marks the point where he imagined that a struggle against the white social order might begin. Baldwin ultimately claimed that the possibility of liberation could only really exist in the desire

to be liberated from the stigma of blackness by embracing it... to cease, forever, one’s interior agreement and collaboration with the authors of one’s degradation... when the black man’s mind is no longer controlled by the white man’s fantasies.

This may be the suicidal endeavor of the fanatic or the revolutionary, but as he said, “perhaps the moral of the story (and the hope of the world) lies in what one demands, not of others but of oneself.” One makes these demands of

first exposure of Harlem’s libertinism by white authorities indicates that he intended to shape his constituency into the normative structure of the dominant culture.

destroying courthouses instead of performing in theaters. When asked what his revolution would look like:

I’m not exactly sure I want a revolution. If I’m being sincere, I have to say that I don’t particularly want it. The current situation, the current regimes allow me to revolt, but a revolution would probably not allow me to revolt, that is, to revolt individually. But this regime allows me to revolt. I can be against it. But if it were a real revolution, I might not be able to be against it. There would be adherence, and I am not that kind of man: I am not a man of adherence, but a man of revolt. My point of view is very egotistic. I would like for the world—and pay close attention to the way I say this—I would like for the world not to change so that I can be against the world.

Genet did not find beauty in revolutionary violence. The beauty of revolt might coincide with such violence, but the violence was not beautiful in and of itself. For example, he didn’t see the Terror of the French revolution as beautiful: “I don’t know whether one can speak of beauty, because they already had power”. Revolt is beautiful, danger too, but when that revolt becomes ritualized, it risks losing its magic. He imagined revolution as the possible breaking of ritual, “but only when a revolution is under way, because when it’s over, it becomes ritualized almost automatically.” This element that evades or strains against ritual fascinated Genet. To understand it:

We’d have to talk about potlatch and destructive intoxication. Destructive intoxication even among the most conscious and intelligent men. Think of Lenin offering the Soviet people public urinals made of gold. In every revolution there is an intoxicated panic, more or less contained, but also more or less unleashed. This intoxication showed itself in France, for example, in all Europe, by the peasant uprisings before the French Revolution, and

revolutions are carried out by family men.”[†] When asked why he never travelled to the Soviet Union, he quipped that he was afraid of being bored to death! When asked why he’d never accepted an invitation to Cuba he said he would only go if the Revolution had abolished flags, for “a flag, as a sign of recognition, as an emblem around which a group is formed, has become a castrating and deadly piece of theatricality.” Had the revolution in Cuba abolished all flags? If not, he surely wouldn’t go there. When asked if he considered the events of May 1968 to be a revolution, he said that they might have been if they’d been seizing and

† Genet’s joke about revolution as the activity of “family men” is particularly funny because of the way it complements an argument made by Frank Wilderson III in his piece “The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement”, wherein he analyzes and contrasts the communiqués of combatants in the Black Liberation Army and Germany’s Red Army Faction. For him, there is a fundamental difference between these texts, because whatever the violence they employ, the RAF combatants will always have a familial place in the German imaginary as the wayward children of the country. By contrast, he argues, BLA fighters like Assata Shakur have no recourse to the fantasy structure of the Family, and thus cannot ever be figured as America’s wayward children. In this sense, revolution is truly a family matter: a reordering and contestation of the family’s business, but never a challenge to the structure itself. Wilderson’s argument is interestingly supported in reading Genet’s small amount of writing about the RAF. For example in “Violence and Brutality”, his defense of the RAF, there is a noticeable lack of the beauty and brilliance with which he writes about the Panthers or George Jackson. Instead, we get a surprisingly boring piece in which Genet bewilderingly invokes concepts—*honesty, humanity, reason*—almost entirely absent (thankfully) from the rest of his corpus. In it, he lays out justifications of RAF violence which line up closely with Wilderson’s reading of the revolt of Germany’s children. Genet actually begins the piece with a metaphor comparing the RAF’s activity to the same violence intrinsic to impregnation and childbirth; a normative metaphor grossly at odds with his way of describing the poetic, beautiful violence Jackson or the Panthers. Unwittingly, Genet elaborated the distance between these violences.

the self because liberation cannot stem from any demand made upon the enemy. As Baldwin put it:

They cannot afford to change it. They would not know how to go about changing it, even if their imaginations were capable of encompassing the concept of black freedom. But this concept lives in their imaginations, and in the popular imagination, only as a nightmare. Blacks have never been free in this country, never was it intended that they should be free, and the specter of so dreadful a freedom—the idea of a license so bloody and abandoned—conjures up another, unimaginable country, a country in which no decent, God-fearing white man or woman can live. A civilized country is, by definition, a country dominated by whites, in which the blacks clearly know their place.

We’ll pause here to tease out a bit of what Baldwin meant by “civilized”, as the concept returns at many points throughout the book. We know this enemy well, but Baldwin approaches from a queer angle—one outside the metanarrative and without the baggage of anarchist orthodoxy. Years earlier, in *Notes of a Native Son* he described the “glittering, mechanical, inescapable civilization which has put to death our freedom.” The specter of “civilization” and “the civilized” appears over a dozen times in *No Name in the Street*. He deployed the concept of “the civilized” as a status reserved for the included and as always predicated on the exclusion of another (Arabs in France, black people in the US). He used it to criticize leftists for their hesitancy to act, and their willingness to limit themselves to discourse and debate, “so choked and cloaked with formulas that they no longer seem to have any connection” to life. He bemoaned the civilized “impersonality of our time” and his unwillingness to make peace with the world of “Cadillacs, Frigidaires and IBM machines.” He spoke of “civilized” as an award given to those educated

in order to defend the system, as opposed to those “uncivilized black possessions” that must constantly be excluded, policed, enslaved or killed. Finally, for him it was a justification of the slaughter of indigenous people and the enslavement of blacks; the altar upon which they’re sacrificed. In naming civilization as enemy, he significantly located society[†] in its entirety (economically and historically yes, but also psychically, sexually, spiritually) as the beast that enslaves and destroys.

Baldwin unveiled civilization as the corporeality—the physical manifestation, the excrescence—of the white fantasy world. Describing the experience of being in the American South, he wrote:

There is the great, vast, brooding, welcoming and blood-stained land, beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart. The land seems nearly to weep beneath the burden of this civilization’s unnameable excrescences. The people and the children wander blindly through their forest of billboards, antennae, Coca-Cola bottles, gasstations, drive-ins, motels, beer cans, music of a strident and invincible melancholy, stilted wooden porches, snapping fans, aggressively blue-jeaned buttocks, strutting crotches, pint bottles, condoms, in the weeds, rotting automobile corpses, brown as beetles, earrings flashing in the gloom of bus stops: over all there seems to hang a miasma of lust and longing and rage. Every Southern city seemed to me to have been but lately rescued from the swamps, which were patiently waiting to reclaim it. The people all seemed to remember their time under water, and to be both dreading and anticipating their return to that freedom from responsibility.

76 | [†] As he clarified in “Stranger in the Village”, “the present civilization, which is the only one that matters.”

the paradox of blackness be reconciled within a civilization built on its enslavement and perpetuated through its exclusion? Is there hope of some inclusion and some remediation of this divide? And if not, is the category of Humanity itself our enemy?

A white man kills three black men: he remains innocent.

A white man falls from a wall: three black men will be sentenced.

Without meaning to, I just formulated a sort of equation for black-white relationships, in America and throughout the Christian West.

Like Baldwin, Genet held out no hope that white Americans would do anything for those combatants ensnared in their enemy’s webs of repression. Not because they were cowards (which they were), but because they are entirely unable to lessen the “vertiginous space that separates Man from the black.” The only possible outcome he could imagine was bloodshed. “It’s simple: the blacks are going to kill you.... I have come to that part of my speech where, to help save the blacks, I am calling for crime, for the assassination of whites. Other meetings like this one will be held to raise money and to acquire arms....”

While he developed a conception of the use of a poetic weapon in revolution, he clarified that a revolution itself entailed a specific thing, inextricable from destruction. As shown in his interview with Fichte, he had a rather complex relationship to the idea of revolution. He was deeply suspicious of the possibility for revolution to function as a normative event: “one gets the impression in the end that

assemblages” which constitute it if “Man” is ever to be abolished. He wages that doing so begins with the experiences of the excluded from the domain of Man. Far from a politics of representation, he describes an “insurrection” or an “exit strategy” against the categories which construct the “world of man”.

to “slave”. He claimed: “we can be sure that Jackson and the Soledad Brothers will not be judged as Men by Men; the distance that separates them from each other is still unbridgeable.” So he posed the question:

What, then, is the nature of this vertiginous space that—in America and throughout the Christian West—separates Man (the basis of Humanism!) and the black? It is obvious that, as a whole, all the laws of which Man is so proud are not set up for the black. They are set up against him.... I will ask the question again: what is the nature of this space, vertiginous for one side and reassuring for the other, that—in America and throughout the Christian West—both separates and binds together Man and the black?

Genet’s question strikes with an almost stunning lucidity. This question of the dizzying and seemingly impassable distance between blackness and Man continues to challenge today’s combatants. Genet kept asking it in conversations and interviews years later. This question underlies the writings of Afro-pessimists like Wilderson and black feminists like Alexander Weheliye or Sylvia Wynter[†]. Can

† In his recent book *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye takes up the theories of black feminists like Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter and uses them to interrogate the construction of race and also the category of the Human itself. Throughout his text, he argues for a conception of “race, racialization, and racial identities as ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern West.” He refuses race as a biological or cultural descriptor, but instead describes it as a changing system which defines the borders of “Man”. By his account, Wynter and Spillers disrupt the category of “Human as Man” by analyzing and attacking the “deeply gendered and sexualized provenances of racializing assemblages.” He argues that the category of Human itself has to be interrogated and disarticulated from “racial

This anticipation—a sense of waiting, patience—recurs several times throughout the book, and warrants our attention. For now, we’ll say that this patience stems from a recognition of the decline and decomposition which is always already happening within civilization, and which its defenders must constantly mobilize against. It recalls Walter Benjamin’s attempt to “recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they crumbled.” For Baldwin, this return to a freedom—a terrifying freedom outside of or after civilization—was at stake in the conflict unfolding in the US, but was also something incomprehensible to white America. He said that the US couldn’t dare to assess or imagine the price paid by its victims, because to understanding their revolt would reveal them to be “revolting against all established civilized value.” The truth of this, for him, followed from his assessment that they were revolting against the preconditions of the Western existence. He quoted Bobby Seale in asserting that in the fantasy life of white Americans, the conflict was unfolding between the white god and the dark gods which they’d prefer to repress; a conflict that challenged their very sense of honor, safety, certainty and self. Baldwin added, “for a people caught in a civilization in crisis, history fails to give any very sanguine answers.” For him, the very identities and histories from which civilized Americans draw meaning rely upon an inextricable subjugation. This history of subjection, he feared, couldn’t be redeemed without further bloodshed.

One may see that the history, which is now indivisible from oneself, has been full of errors and excesses; but this is not the same thing as seeing that, for millions of people, this history—oneself—has been nothing but an intolerable yoke, a stinking prison, a shrieking grave. It is not so easy to see that, for millions of people, life itself depends on the speediest possible demolition of this

history, even if this means the leveling, or the destruction of its heirs.

To pose this history as indivisible from “its heirs” is to call into question each of our complicities in the illusion of civilized order; in the civilized fantasy and its corporal excrescence. This question of complicity and revolt is teased out in the final paragraphs of *No Name in the Street*:

Questions louder than drums begin beating in the mind, and one realizes that what is called civilization lives first of all in the mind, has the mind above all as its province, and that the civilization, or its rudiments, can continue to live long after its externals have vanished—they can never entirely vanish from the mind. These questions—they are too vague for questions, this excitement, this discomfort—concern the true nature of any inheritance and the means by which that inheritance is handed down. There is a reason, after all, that some people wish to colonize the moon, and others dance before it as before an ancient friend. And the extent to which these apprehensions, instincts, relations, are modified by the passage of time, or the accumulation of inventions, is a question that no one seems able to answer. All men, clearly, are primitive, but it can be doubted that all men are primitive in the same way; and if they are not, it can only be because, in that absolutely unassailable privacy of the soul, they do not worship the same gods. Both continents, Africa and America, be it remembered, were “discovered”—what a wealth of arrogance that little word contains!—with devastating results for the indigenous populations, whose only human use thereafter was as the source of capital for white people. On both continents the white and the dark gods met in combat, and it is on the outcome of this combat that the future of both continents depends.

He imagined this magic, violence, intelligence, poetry, as useful to black people in America in their struggle for life. “All they have accumulated for centuries while observing their former masters in silence and almost in secret,” Genet assures us, could be mobilized in the project of liberation. These words, written concurrently with Baldwin’s “devious black patience,” could just as well have been found in his own book. Genet viewed Jackson’s writing as a first measure in an attempt to think through the possibility of insurrection. Jackson was killed before such an insurrection could occur, but of the dead revolutionary, Genet said:

If the quake his death set off in us has not ceased, we ought also to know that every day young anonymous blacks are struck down in the streets by the police or by whites, while others are tortured in American prisons. Dead, they will survive among us—which isn’t much—but they live among the peoples who have been crushed by the white world, thanks to the resounding voice of George Jackson.

And so despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of God in Jackson’s writing (which Genet was pleased to point out), an element of the same messianic potential found in Baldwin is revealed. Jackson’s writing, and Genet’s writings about him in turn, struggle to awaken the dead so as to fight alongside the living.

As Jackson awaited trial, Genet made every effort to keep his situation firmly within the context of centuries of struggle against slavery and white supremacy in the US. He claimed that this particular trial had lasted for three hundred years. After Jackson died, he said that his name would now find its obvious place among all the slave rebels who preceded him. For Genet, Jackson’s life and death remained inseparable from the carceral continuum in which whiteness corresponds to “master” and blackness

Genet saw it as no mystery that Jackson and the Panthers would have found one another and achieved communication through writing as a form of presence. "For myself, having lived with the Black Panthers, I see Jackson there, in his place, fighting alongside them with the same conviction and the same talent as his two brothers accused of murder: Huey Newton and Bobby Seale." In no uncertain terms, Genet believed that it was only by means of Jackson's poetic weapon that he found his place among the revolutionaries on the outside. In introducing these words he warns:

If we accept the idea that the revolutionary enterprise of a man or a people has its source in their poetic genius, or more precisely, that this enterprise is the inevitable conclusion of poetic genius, we must reject nothing that makes poetic exaltation possible. Certain details in this work will seem immoral to you; this is because the entire work rejects your morality.... Finally, every young black American who writes is searching for himself and testing himself, and sometimes he recognizes, at the very center in his own heart, a white man he must annihilate.

Jackson's book cannot be separated from this intent to annihilate. Genet called the book a "murderous act against white America" and described this attempted "murder by book" as a difficult undertaking that required a tremendous binding of body and spirit, demanding "a time that could be called infinite." In carrying out this murderous deed, Jackson made himself "more legendary than real, representing the sudden omnipotence of the black world so feared and dreamed of." He became, in the libidinal imaginary, "an image that goes beyond his physical person and his ordinary life." This exemplifies those powerful "words, choices, attitudes, magic" with which Genet imbued prison writing.

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life. Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind: it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come.

In his final interview, he repeated that the only hope of the world demanded that the notion of western hegemony and the psychic structure of civilization be stopped once and for all. But how does one destroy a psychic structure? What is this terrible "inheritance" and what are "the means by which that inheritance is handed down"? The task might be conceived of as what he imagined when he wrote: "when the pagan and the slave spit on the cross and pick up the gun, it means that the halls of history are about to be invaded once again, destroying and dispersing the present occupants."

If Baldwin held out hope of this type of destruction and dispersal, it was to be found in those who had made a mysterious vow to "never be so wretched or so wicked" as was demanded of them by this civilization. He said that to make such a vow meant, "turning away, then,

from what I have called the welcome table.” He explored this further, later in the book, with different but related metaphors of “the Family”[†] and “the Great House.”[‡]

He described traveling to San Francisco, where he observed young black militants and countercultural white youth. He described the existential crisis experienced by the white kids who realized the meaninglessness of the roles they were expected to play, who realized that being accomplices of the black militants meant choosing

† The play between these two metaphoric figures “Family” and “Great House” is worth noting. Whereas in vernacular English, “house” almost exclusively refers to a residence or dwelling, historically the term has meant a family, especially one that can trace its lineage. It also has referred to a temple and a seat of government. And so, we have invested in one spatial figure: god, state, family. It is further worth noting, relating to investigations in the previous two issues of *Bœdan*, that the term “domestication” is derived from the Latin *domesticatus*, literally “dwells in a home”—and by extension under the laws of god, state, family. Domestication then names the violent process of capture and subsumption within this home. Finally, we’ll point out that the modern term “economy” is derived from the Greek *oikonomia*, or “management of the house.” And so when we speak of economy, we are always already talking about those economies concerned with the ordering and reproduction of the Great House and its order: libidinal economies, racial economies, spiritual economies. Many will argue that the Family is the sphere of “reproduction” in service to the means of production, but don’t get it twisted: economy is at the service of the Family.

‡ Baldwin was surely also thinking of Martin Luther King’s final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, wherein King deploys the metaphor of “The World House” into which black people in the US were struggling for inclusion. Thaddeus Russell argues that entrance into that house, in King’s assessment, would be predicated on self-discipline, masculinization and moral reform. Or as he put it: “Historians have yet to acknowledge what King well understood, that sexual freedom was included in the price of admission to that house.” It would appear that King’s death signaled Baldwin’s ultimate repudiation, not only of America, but of “the World House” too.

by another, these words must attempt a sort of impossible communication with the outside world:

The forbidden and accursed words, the bloody words, the words spit out in a lather, discharged with sperm, the slandered, reprobate words, the unwritten words,—like the ultimate name of god—the dangerous, padlocked words, the words that don’t belong in the dictionary, because if they were written there, complete and not maimed by ellipses, they would say too quickly the suffocating misery of a solitude that is not accepted and that is whipped and prodded only by what it is deprived of: sex and freedom. It is therefore prudent that any writing that reaches us from this infernal place should reach us as though mutilated, pruned of its overly tumultuous adornments. It is thus behind bars, accepted only by them, that its readers, if they dare, will guess at the infamy of a situation that a forthright vocabulary could never reconstruct: but behind the permitted words, learn to hear the others.

Baldwin articulated something incommensurable between the black experience and writing, and Genet recognized this in Jackson. In his esteem, Jackson’s words posed the utmost danger to white society. Against all odds, Jackson performed a paradoxical labor of fitting his hatred of the white social order into the language of that order. This tempered it, surely, but “in a revolutionary work written by a black man in prison, some traces must remain, then, of the orgiastic and hate-filled trajectory pursued in an impossible solitude.” Though he doesn’t say as much, it’s clear that Genet recognized in Jackson’s writing something of his own prison writings as a rite of passage in his life; something of the searing need for connection that those scribbled and smuggled works reached toward. In a sense, only by some measure of solitary self-discovery can one achieve a real connection beyond the prison walls.

Jackson's book makes it brutally clear that in prison, in the cell, the white skin of the prisoners is taken as a sign of the complicity with the white skin of the guards; so that while the white guards stand watch over a hell in which white prisoners are confined, the white prisoners stand watch over another hell inside that one in which black prisoners are confined. Now the security of the guards, their independence—since the time they spend on duty is divided by trips into town or by their family life—allows for a certain respite with regard to the white prisoners. But because these prisoners must remain constantly in prison and are never distracted by the outside, all their all their time and imagination are spent maintaining the hell in which they hold the black prisoners captive....

This complicity with the guards is based in no small part on the white inmates' nostalgia for the social world and the social order from which they'd been removed, an order to which the guards functioned as their only link. By analyzing this, Genet took aim at whiteness itself: "the complicity of the white prisoners with the guards intensifies, and maintains at its highest pitch, that which forms the basis of relations between whites and blacks: racism." As in his own prison writing, he articulated the way that sexual, racial, and libidinal ritual upholds and justifies the perpetuation of the prison order.

For Genet, there existed a complicity between all works written in a prison or an asylum. He spoke to the struggle of the imprisoned to find within themselves a burning light in spite of the walls, moats, jailers, and judges that constrain them. They dwell and search for themselves in the worst degradation of social repression. This leads to a tremendous distancing from the world, but gives life to a genius proportionate to this distance. If read

between irrelevance or treason to their inheritance. Acting upon their desired allegiance to their darker siblings would "place them in conflict with all that they had loved and all that had given them an identity, rendering their present uncertain and their futures still more so...." Baldwin described the lostness which stemmed from having not

expected to be forced to judge their parents, their elders, and their antecedents, so harshly.... Coming to the defense of the rejected and destitute, they were confronted with the extent of their own alienation....

In his mind, those who made the choice to join the revolt had opted out of the familial future promised to them. He saw the streets of San Francisco as an unprecedented, howling, orphanage, filled with children who had abandoned their families. He reframed the unfolding conflict as being less about a "racial problem"—in doing so curiously de-centering racial essentialism—and more a problem of how the great Family treated its children (both the blacks, "despised and slaughtered bastards," and also the alienated and rebellious white children). Baldwin recognized the white "flower children" as patiently waiting for their black siblings to recognize that they had disavowed the Great House in their struggle to become "organic, autonomous, loving and joyful creatures" out of "their desire to connect to love, joy, and eroticism." They had taken the first step. The heirs of the great house had repudiated their parents, and the continuation of the house was endangered.

In San Francisco, the eyes that watched seemed to feel that the children were deliberately giving away family secrets in the hope of egging on the blacks to destroy the family. And that is precisely what they were doing—helplessly, unconsciously, out of a profound desire to be

saved, to live. But the blacks already knew the family secrets and had no interest in them. Nor did they have much confidence in these troubled white boys and girls. The black trouble was of a different order, and blacks had to be concerned with much more than their own private happiness or unhappiness. They had to be aware that this troubled white person might suddenly decide not to be in trouble and go home—and when he went home, he would be the enemy. Therefore, it was best not to speak too freely to anyone who spoke too freely to you, especially not on the streets of a nation which probably has more hired informers working for it, here and all over the world, than any nation in history. True rebels, after all, are as rare as true lovers, and, in both cases, to mistake a fever for a passion can destroy one's life.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that a great many of those children did go home; they returned to the great human Family as professors and politicians, as fathers and mothers, as cybernetic architects of our present misery. But the Family has been exposed. The secret is out. Baldwin's metaphor reveals a powerful complicity between the best of queer thought, Afro-pessimism, and the growing body of theory in the anarchist milieu which rejects the foundational status of the human. Our enemy is the Family—that great, expansive, and archaic libidinal structure. It is this human Family from which queer and black subjects are excluded. Moreover, this Family constitutes itself through these exclusions, its *sine qua non*. When we speak of severing an inheritance, or of a civilization we are trying to leave, we refer to this exact libidinal structure trapped within us and ensnaring us in turn.

contributing to the struggle there for black liberation. In addition to months spent traveling alongside and speaking on behalf of the Black Panthers, he agreed to write an introduction to a compiled volume of the writings of imprisoned black revolutionary George Jackson, awaiting trial in California for the murder of a prison guard. Genet put a tremendous volume of words to page in support of many imprisoned black liberation fighters, but his writing in support of George Jackson stands out with a singular beauty and ferocity, specifically the introduction to *Sole-dad Brother* and also “For George Jackson”, distributed in the last days of Jackson's life. These works, spanning the better course of a year, also serve as the strongest example of certain aspects of Genet's thought upon which we'd like to elaborate.

Firstly, we should say that Genet viewed writing, specifically in Jackson's case, as a potential weapon in a war upon society. He referred in various instances to Jackson's letters as a “gripping poem of love and combat”, as “a weapon in a struggle for liberation, and a love poem”, as a “combat weapon”. He doesn't give this praise lightly. Far from ascribing this quality to any or all writing, Genet clarified that this is something very special about the writing of a prisoner, a black prisoner, a revolutionary black prisoner under threat of execution. He said that “to understand the importance of this book as a weapon in struggle, the reader must not forget that Jackson is in danger of death.”

Genet believed that the book-as-weapon could be especially dangerous when written and deployed in the context of a struggle for black liberation. The book is inseparable from this context. Much of Genet's writings focused on the fantastic underpinnings of prison life and his writing about Jackson continued this:

Toward the end of his life, in the introduction to the 1984 edition of *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin gestured again toward the potential in this taking account. He said, “not once have the Civilized been able to honor, recognize or describe the Savage.... Once they had decided he was savage there was nothing to honor, recognize, or describe.” But on the other hand, “the unadmitted panic of which I spoke above is created by the terror that the Savage can, now, describe the Civilized.” For Baldwin, the possibility of insurrection followed from a desire to understand the enemy while remaining incomprehensible to him. In imagining this type of study and patience, he held a special place for silence. Rather than protest and petition—in attempt to make the self coherent and recognizable—silence bolsters a more clandestine potential. In silence, we evade answering the omnipresent call to identify. Silence allows for a revolt to seemingly spring from anywhere and from nowhere. Silence accompanies the ellipses before and after certainty, a presence attuned to the unknown. Silence, then, marks the space of an (im)possibility outside civilization.

It is true that our weapons do not appear to be formidable, but, then, they never have. Then, as now, our greatest weapon is silence.

Ecstatic Weapons

As the 60s drew to a close, Jean Genet travelled to the United States on two occasions with the intention of

secondly, from the dearly departed Christopher Chitty in 2013: “be attentive to the voices of the oppressed, the slaves who possess the key knowledge, and be patient for the most opportune moment for slitting the tyrants’ throats.”

One gets the sense that Baldwin’s recognition and rejection of a complicity with this Family produced a profound and surreal effect on his sense of time[†]:

In this place, and more particularly, in this time, generations appear to flower, flourish, and wither with the speed of light. I don’t think that this is merely the inevitable reflection of middle age: I suspect that there really has been some radical alteration in the structure, the nature, of time. One may say that there are no clear images; everything seems superimposed on, and at war with something else. There are no clear vistas: the road that seems to pull one forward into the future is also pulling one backward into the past. I felt, anyway, kaleidoscopic, fragmented, walking through the streets of San Francisco, trying to decipher whatever it was that my own consciousness made of all the elements in which I was entangled, and which were all tangled up in me.

Elsewhere in *No Name in the Street* he describes a similar temporal nonlinearity:

Time passes and passes. It passes backward and it passes forward and it carries you along, and no one in the whole wide world knows more about time than this: it is

† Something interesting emerges when we compare Baldwin’s dysphoria around time with the accounts of participants in the uprising in Ferguson, such as this one from the interview “Cars, Guns, Autonomy”, published in the journal *Avalanche*: “Time didn’t make sense there. Somehow you’d be there and all of a sudden eight hours would have disappeared. I remember one night, we were all hanging out, there had been a lot of looting, the liquor store was on fire and we were all just sitting around watching it burn and this man said ‘fuck, what time is it!? I have to go to work tomorrow.’ Our friend laughed because she also had to go to work in the morning and she asked, ‘do you really want to know?’ and he replied ‘no, fuck that; time doesn’t matter. Fuck work, that doesn’t matter.’ and he just went back to partying. So yeah, things changed, the ability to talk to people really changed.”

carrying you through an element you do not understand into an element you will not remember. Yet, something remembers—it can even be said that something avenges: the trap of our century, and the subject now before us.

In the break from the family and its time, there emerges an intimate need, a desire to remember, to perhaps redeem the dead. Time, for Baldwin, was open, chaotic, splintered through with fragments of experiences and sensations. His narrative moves quickly through years, leaping forward and then reaching back. It also pauses, slows down and laboriously pours over specific moments. These instances of extreme presence read as significant, because in surveying each and every detail of his world, Baldwin exposed the points wherein it could be undone. In several sections of *No Name in the Street*, we find instances where some slight shift would allow the black subjects of his book to enact a vengeance on those who maintain their situation: a black barber who could slit his white client's throat any day; a segregated cafeteria where the black people remain close enough to attack the white employees or patrons; he himself being "close enough to kill them all." For Baldwin the possibility of redemptive violence is everywhere. This potential imbues him with a sort of radical patience: "black people know why they're in prison, and not all of them can be kept in solitary. These blacks have unforgiving relatives, to say nothing of unforgiving children, at every level of American life. The government cannot afford to trust a single black man in this country, nor can they penetrate any black's disguise, or apprehend how devious and tenacious black patience can be." This omnipresent redemptive possibility of attack, coupled with a devious black patience, fills the white imaginary with dread. This carefully repressed terror dwells amidst the stuff of the white fantasy life. Baldwin saw it as unnecessary to advocate violence, as it was already there, waiting.

This radical patience appears in conflict with his assertion in earlier interviews that, "there is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.... The time is always now. Everybody who has ever thought about his own life knows this." But, the point isn't to delay this sense of salvation to some future moment, some revolution or culmination of progressive movements after which we will be saved. We can, in a way, resolve this apparent contradiction by invoking that "weak messianic power" alluded to by Walter Benjamin which reveals that the Messiah might enter through the narrow window in every moment.[†] Forgoing the hope that some movement will come and wash away this wretched mess, Baldwin's book sounds a call to presence, to patience, to a studying and taking account of the world around us in order to locate those fractures and weak points where we might strike a killing blow[‡].

† The final words of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogenous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.

‡ In talking of this type of patience, we're reminded here of a two passages, one written in the previous century and the other written in subsequent one. First from Edward Carpenter in 1883: "We are a menace to you, O civilization! We have seen you—we allow you—we bear with you for a time, but beware! For in a moment and, when the hour comes, inevitably, we shall arise and sweep you away!" And